

# Oedipus Rex

## Background Info

### Author Bio

**Full Name:** Sophocles

**Date of Birth:** 496 B.C.E.

**Place of Birth:** Colonus, a village outside of Athens, Greece

**Date of Death:** 405–406 B.C.E.

**Brief Life Story:** Considered one of the three greatest playwrights of classical Greek theater, Sophocles was a friend of Pericles and Herodotus, and a respected citizen who held political and military offices in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. Best known are his three Theban plays, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles's other complete surviving works are *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Trachinian Women*. He is credited with changing Greek drama by adding a third actor, reducing the role of the chorus, and paying greater attention to character development.

### Key Facts

**Full Title:** *Oedipus Rex* (or *Oedipus the King*)

**Genre:** Tragic drama

**Setting:** The royal house of Thebes

**Climax:** When Oedipus gouges out his eyes

**Protagonist:** Oedipus

**Antagonist:** Tiresias; Creon

### Historical and Literary Context

**When Written:** circa 429 B.C.E.

**Where Written:** Athens, Greece

**When Published:** circa 429 B.C.E.

**Literary Period:** Classical

**Related Literary Works:** Of Sophocles's surviving dramatic works, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* treat different episodes of the same legend, using many of the same characters. Sophocles's writing career overlapped with that of Aeschylus and Euripides, the other great tragic playwrights of fifth-century Athens. Among Aeschylus's best-known tragedies are *Seven Against Thebes*, *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. Euripides's most influential works include *Medea*, *Electra*, and *The Bacchae*. A 20th-century theatrical retelling of the Oedipus myth is Jean

Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine*.

**Related Historical Events:** The story of Oedipus and the tragedies that befell his family were nothing new to Sophocles's audience. Greek authors routinely drew their basic material from a cycle of four epic poems, known as the *Theban Cycle*, that was already ancient in the fifth century B.C.E. and is now lost to history. The *Theban Cycle* was as familiar to Athenians as the *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, so everyone in the audience would have known what was going to happen to Oedipus. Sophocles used this common story but made Oedipus a contemporary character, a man of action and persistence who represented many of the ideals of Athenian leadership. It is Oedipus's desire to find out the truth—a quality that, again, would have been admired by Sophocles's audience—that leads to his destruction.

### Extra Credit

**The Oedipus Complex:** Sigmund Freud used the Oedipus story as an important example in his theory of the unconscious. He believed that "It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father." He referred to these two urges as the "Oedipus complex."

## Plot Summary

At the start of the play, the city of Thebes is suffering terribly. Citizens are dying from plague, crops fail, women are dying in childbirth and their babies are stillborn. A group of priests comes to the royal palace to ask for help from **Oedipus**, their king who once saved them from the tyranny of the terrible Sphinx. Oedipus has already sent his brother-in-law, **Creon**, to the oracle of the god Apollo to find out what can be done. (A little background: before Oedipus arrived in Thebes, the previous king, Laius, was murdered under mysterious circumstances and the murderer was never found. When Oedipus arrived in Thebes and saved the city, he was made king and married the widowed queen, **Jocasta**, sister of Creon.) Now Creon returns with the oracle's news: for the plague to be lifted from the city, the murderer of Laius must be discovered and punished. The oracle claims that the murderer is still living in Thebes.

Oedipus curses the unknown murderer and swears he will find and punish him. He orders the people of Thebes, under punishment of exile, to give any information they have about the death of Laius. Oedipus sends for **Tiresias**, the blind prophet, to help with the investigation. Tiresias comes, but refuses to tell Oedipus what he has seen in his prophetic visions. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of playing a part in Laius's death. Tiresias grows

angry and says that Oedipus is the cause of the plague—he is the murderer of Laius. As the argument escalates, Oedipus accuses Tiresias of plotting with Creon to overthrow him, while Tiresias hints at other terrible things that Oedipus has done.

Convinced that Creon is plotting to overthrow him, Oedipus declares his intention to banish or execute his brother-in-law. Jocasta and the chorus believe Creon is innocent and beg Oedipus to let Creon go. He relents, reluctantly, still convinced of Creon's guilt. Jocasta tells Oedipus not to put any stock in what prophets and seers say. As an example, she tells him the prophecy she once received—that Laius, her first husband, would be killed by their own son. And yet, Laius was killed by strangers, and her own infant son was left to die in the mountains. But her description of where Laius was killed—a **triple-crossroad**—worries Oedipus. It's the same place where Oedipus once fought with several people and killed them, one of whom fit the description of Laius. He asks that the surviving eyewitness to Laius's murder be brought to him. He tells Jocasta that oracles have played a big part in his life as well—he received a prophecy that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother, which is why he left Corinth, the city he was raised in, and never returned.

An old **messenger** arrives from Corinth with the news that Oedipus's father, King Polybus, has died of old age. This encourages Oedipus. It seems his prophecy might not come true, but he remains worried because his mother is still alive. The messenger tells him not to worry—the king and queen of Corinth were not his real parents. The messenger himself brought Oedipus as a baby to the royal family as a gift after a **shepherd** found the boy in the mountains and gave him to the messenger. The shepherd was the same man Oedipus has already sent for—the eyewitness to Laius's murder. Jocasta begs Oedipus to abandon his search for his origins, but Oedipus insists he must know the story of his birth. Jocasta cries out in agony and leaves the stage. The shepherd arrives but doesn't want to tell what he knows. Only under threat of death does he reveal that he disobeyed the order to kill the infant son of Laius and Jocasta, and instead gave that baby to the messenger. That baby was Oedipus, who in fact killed his father Laius and married his mother. Oedipus realizes that he has fulfilled his awful prophecy. Queen Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus, in a fit of grief, gouges out his own eyes. Blind and grief-stricken, Oedipus bemoans his fate. Creon, after consulting an oracle, grants Oedipus's request and banishes him from Thebes.

## Characters

**Oedipus** – Long before the play begins, Oedipus became king of Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. His sharp mind and quickness to action have made him an admired and successful leader. When the priests come to petition him after a plague strikes the city, he has already set into motion two plans to deal with the city's crisis. Throughout the play, he makes decisions boldly and quickly, if not always wisely. In his attempts to discover the truth about the murder of Laius, he falsely accuses **Creon** and **Tiresias** of treachery, and even forces the reluctant shepherd to tell his story, which publicly reveals Oedipus to be the murderer and husband of his own mother. The same leadership skills that have brought him fame and success—decisive action, a desire to solve mysteries using his intellect—drive him to his own destruction.

**Creon** – Brother of **Jocasta**. Whereas **Oedipus** is the charismatic leader who speaks openly in front of his people, Creon is

more political and perhaps more scheming. Creon is offended and alarmed when Oedipus accuses him of treason, but he speaks calmly and tries to show the error of the accusation by appealing to Oedipus's sense of reason. At the end of the play, however, he is more than willing to step into the power vacuum after Oedipus's terrible fate has been revealed. Even then, however, he cautiously makes sure to follow the dictates of the gods, rather than to trying to resist fate as Oedipus has done.

**Tiresias** – The blind prophet or seer. He knows that the terrible prophecy of **Oedipus** has already come true, but doesn't want to say what he knows. Only when Oedipus accuses him of treachery does Tiresias suggest that Oedipus himself is guilty of the murder of King Laius. He leaves Oedipus with a riddle that implies, plainly enough for the audience to understand, that Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother.

**Jocasta** – Wife of **Oedipus**. Also, mother of Oedipus. When the play begins, she no longer believes in the prophecies of seers. She tries to convince Oedipus not to worry about what **Tiresias** says. As more evidence points toward the probability that Oedipus has in fact fulfilled a terrible prophecy, she begs him not to dig any further into his past. He will not be persuaded. Realizing that her son killed her first husband, that she is now married to her son, and that Oedipus is about to bring all of this to light, Jocasta takes her own life.

**The Chorus** – In this play, the chorus represents the elder citizens of Thebes, reacting to the events of the play. The chorus speaks as one voice, or sometimes through the voice of its leader. It praises, damns, cowers in fear, asks or offers advice, and generally helps the audience interpret the play.

**A Priest** – He comes to the royal house to tell **Oedipus** of the city's suffering and to ask Oedipus to save Thebes once more.

**A Messenger** – The messenger from Corinth informs **Oedipus** that King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth were not his actual parents. The messenger himself gave Oedipus as a baby to the Corinthian king and queen. He got the baby from a Theban **shepherd** whom he met in the woods. Oedipus's ankles were pinned together at the time—in Greek, the name "Oedipus" means "swollen ankles."

**A Shepherd** – The former servant of King Laius who took pity on the baby **Oedipus** and spared his life. The shepherd was also an eyewitness to the death of King Laius. When Oedipus commands the shepherd to tell him what he knows about Oedipus's origins, the shepherd refuses, and only relents under punishment of death.

**Antigone** – Daughter of **Oedipus** and half-sister of Oedipus. Still a small child in *Oedipus Rex*, Antigone appears at the end to bid farewell to her father. She is the main character of Sophocles's *Antigone*.

**Ismene** – Daughter of **Oedipus** and half-sister of Oedipus. Like **Antigone**, Ismene is a small child and appears only at the end of the play when her father says goodbye to her.

## Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the *Summary and Analysis* sections.
- Use the *ThemeTracker* section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

### Fate vs. Free Will

The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Prophets or seers, like blind **Tiresias**, saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. During the fifth century B.C.E., however, when Sophocles was writing his plays, intellectuals within Athenian society had begun to question the legitimacy of the oracles and of the traditional gods. Some of this tension is plain to see in *Oedipus Rex*, which hinges on two prophecies. The first is the prophecy received by King Laius of Thebes that he would have a son by Queen **Jocasta** who would grow up to kill his own father. The second is the prophecy that Oedipus received that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus all work to prevent the prophecies from coming to pass, but their efforts to thwart the prophecies are what actually bring the prophecies to completion.

This raises a question at the heart of the play: does Oedipus have any choice in the matter? He ends up killing his father and marrying his mother without knowing it—in fact, when he is trying to *avoid* doing these very things. Does he have free will—the ability to choose his own path—or is everything in life predetermined? Jocasta argues that the oracles are a sham because she thinks the prediction that her son would kill her husband never came to pass. When she finds out otherwise, she kills herself. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus has fulfilled his terrible prophecy long ago, but without knowing it. He has *already* fallen into his fate. One could argue that he *does* have free will, however, in his decision to pursue the facts about his past,

despite many suggestions that he let it go. In this argument, Oedipus's destruction comes not from his deeds themselves but from his persistent efforts to learn the truth, through which he reveals the true nature of those terrible deeds. Oedipus himself makes a different argument at the end of the play, when he says that his terrible deeds were fated, but that it was he alone who chose to blind himself. Here, Oedipus is arguing that while it is impossible to avoid one's fate, how you respond to your fate is a matter of free will.

### Guilt and Shame

The play begins with a declaration from the oracle at Delphi: Thebes is suffering because the person guilty of the murder of King Laius has not been brought to justice. **Oedipus** sets himself the task of discovering the guilty party—so guilt, in the legal sense, is central to *Oedipus Rex*. Yet ultimately it is not legal guilt but the emotion of guilt, of remorse for having done something terrible, that drives the play.

After all, one can argue that neither Oedipus nor Jocasta are guilty in a legal sense. They committed their acts unknowingly. Yet their overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame for violating two of the basic rules of civilized humanity—the taboos against incest and killing one's parents—are enough to make Jocasta commit suicide and to make Oedipus blind himself violently.

### Sight vs. Blindness

When **Oedipus** publicly declares his intention to solve the mystery of King Laius's murder, he says, "I'll start again—I'll bring it all to light myself." Oedipus's vision and intelligence have made him a great king of Thebes—he solved the riddle of the Sphinx and revitalized the city. But he is blind to the truth about his own life. It takes the blind prophet, **Tiresias**, to point out his ignorance and to plant the first seeds of doubt in Oedipus's mind. When Oedipus mocks Tiresias's blindness, Tiresias predicts that Oedipus himself will soon be blind. And indeed, when Oedipus learns the full story—that he has killed his father and married his mother—he gouges out his eyes. He learns the nature of fate and the power of the gods, but at a great cost. And though he is blinded, he has learned to see something he could not see before.

### Finding Out the Truth

The terrible deeds that are **Oedipus's** undoing actually took place long before the play begins. King Laius has been dead for many years, Oedipus has ruled for some time, and his marriage to Jocasta has produced four children. They might have all remained happy in their ignorance had the plague not come to Thebes and the oracle not commanded that the murderer of Laius be found. Good king that he is, Oedipus swears he will find the murderer. Every step of the way, people are reluctant to speak and try to tell him that it would be better if the past were left alone. **Creon** suggests that they discuss the oracle behind closed doors, not in front of everyone, but Oedipus wants to show that he is open to the truth and keeps no secrets from his people. **Tiresias** refuses to say what he knows, and only speaks when he has been insulted and accused of treachery. Jocasta begs Oedipus to cease his investigations. The old **shepherd** gives Oedipus the final pieces of the puzzle only when threatened with death. In his desire to seek out the truth and save his people from the plague, Oedipus becomes his own prosecutor, and then his own judge and punisher.

### Action vs. Reflection

In his quest for truth, **Oedipus** is a man of constant action. When the **priests** come to ask for his help, he has already dispatched **Creon** to the oracle to find out what the gods suggest. When the **chorus** suggests that he consult **Tiresias**, Oedipus has already sent for him. Oedipus decides quickly and acts quickly—traits his audience would have seen as admirable and in the best tradition of Athenian leadership. But Oedipus's tendency to decide and act quickly also leads him down a path to his own destruction. He becomes convinced that Tiresias and Creon are plotting to overthrow him, though he has no evidence to prove it.

At several stages where he might have paused to reflect on the outcome of his actions—where he might have sifted through the evidence before him and decided not to pursue the question further, or not in such a public way—he forges onward, even threatening to torture the reluctant **shepherd** to make him speak. And it is the shepherds words that irrefutably condemn Oedipus. Even here, his will to act doesn't end. Discovering Jocasta, his wife and mother, dead, Oedipus quickly takes his punishment into his own hands and gauges out his eyes.

## Symbols

Symbols are shown in **red** text whenever they appear in the *Plot Summary* and *Summary and Analysis* sections of this LitChart.


### Triple crossroad

**Oedipus** killed King Laius at a place "where three roads meet," or a triple crossroad. Typically, crossroads symbolize a choice to be made. Yet because the murder of Laius occurred in the distant past, Oedipus's choice has already been made, and so the triple crossroads becomes a symbol not of choice but of fate.

### Swollen ankles

As an adult, **Oedipus** still limps from a childhood injury to his ankles. This limp, and his very name—which means "swollen ankle," and which was given to him because of a childhood ankle injury—are clues to his own identity that Oedipus fails to notice. As such, Oedipus's ankles become symbols of his fate. His ankles, literally, are the marks of that fate.

# Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in *Summary and Analysis* make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the *Themes* section. For instance, a bar of  indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

## Lines 341 - 708

### Lines 1 - 340 (in the Robert Fagles translation)

The play begins in the royal house of Thebes. The stage directions state that **Oedipus** solved the riddle of the Sphinx many years earlier and has since ruled as king of Thebes. As the play begins, a procession of miserable-looking **priests** enters. Oedipus follows soon after, walking with a slight limp and attended by guards.

*Oedipus limps because Laius and Jocasta (who he doesn't know are his parents) pinned his ankles together when he was an infant to thwart the prophecy that he would kill Laius (they failed). The limp marks Oedipus's fate, even though he does not know it yet.*



**Oedipus** asks the **priests** why they have come. He knows that the city is sick with plague. He tells them they can trust him to help in any way he can. In a moving speech, a **priest** tells **Oedipus** the city's woes: the crops are ruined, cattle are sick, women die in labor and children are stillborn, and people are perishing from the plague. The priest begs Oedipus to save Thebes, just as Oedipus once saved it from the Sphinx.

*The reference to the Sphinx reminds the audience that Oedipus is a genuine hero. Oedipus saved Thebes from the Sphinx by answering the Sphinx's riddle. In other words, he became a hero by figuring out the truth.*



**Oedipus** says he knows of the trouble and has been trying to think of a solution. He has already sent **Creon**, his brother-in-law, to the oracle at Delphi to find out what the god Apollo advises. Just then, the **priest** notices that Creon is returning from this mission.

*Oedipus is a vigorous and active leader. He has already anticipated the priests' request for help and has done what a good Greek ruler should do—seek advice from an oracle.*



**Creon** tells **Oedipus** and the assembled **priests** the words of the god Apollo, according to the oracle. Before Oedipus became king, the previous king, Laius, was murdered, and his murderer was never discovered. According to the oracle, the killer lives in Thebes. He must be caught and punished in order to stop the plague.

*As when he faced the Sphinx, Oedipus is presented with a puzzle to solve: the identity of Laius's murderer. Shame was believed to have real-world consequences. The plague results from the shame of not punishing Thebe's former king's murderer.*



**Oedipus** asks **Creon** about the circumstances of Laius's death. Creon says that Laius left the city to consult the oracle of Apollo and never returned. Only one eyewitness to the murder survived and returned to Thebes. This man claimed that a band of thieves killed the king. Oedipus asks why no one tried to find the murderers. Creon responds that, at the time, Thebes was under the Sphinx's curse. Oedipus then promises that he'll take on the task of finding the murderer.

*Oedipus is a hero and a man of action. Had his king been murdered, nothing would have stopped him from finding the murderer, just as he is promising to let nothing stop him now. Creon is more pragmatic and less inclined to take action. Having just escaped the Sphinx, searching out Laius's murderer seemed impossible to Creon.*



The **chorus**, which has not heard the news from the oracle, enters and marches around an altar, chanting. The **chorus** catalogs the misfortunes of Thebes and calls on many gods by name to come to the city's aid.

*The chorus, which represents the elders of Thebes, appeals to the gods as the agents of fate and rulers of the world to save the city.*



**Oedipus** orders anyone who knows anything about Laius's murderer to speak, in exchange for light treatment and possibly a reward. But, Oedipus declares, if anyone has useful information and does not speak, the citizens of Thebes must banish this person. Oedipus curses the murderer—"Let that man drag out his life in agony, step by painful step." He adds that even if the murderer ends up being a member of his own family, he or she should receive the same harsh banishment and punishment.

*Oedipus acts quickly to find the killer. He thinks he knows what happened—thieves killed Laius—but is actually blind to the truth. Acting blindly, he curses himself. Greek audiences would have known the Oedipus story, and so in this scene Oedipus would seem to be describing his own fate, or even bringing this fate upon himself.*



**Oedipus** criticizes the people for not hunting more vigorously for Laius's killer. He says he will fight for Laius as if Laius were his own father. Oedipus curses anyone who defies his orders. The leader of the **chorus** suggests that Oedipus send for **Tiresias**, the blind seer. Oedipus announces that he has already done so. Soon, blind Tiresias arrives, led by a boy.

*Another example of Oedipus's strong leadership. He's one step ahead of the suggestions his subjects make to him and has already sent for Tiresias. Yet in saying he would fight for Laius as if he were his own father, Oedipus further displays his own blindness to the truth.*



**Oedipus** asks **Tiresias**, the prophet, to help Thebes end the plague by guiding him to the murderers of King Laius. But Tiresias does not want to tell Oedipus what he knows. He asks to be sent home and says he will not tell his secret. Oedipus insults Tiresias, but the prophet still refuses to speak.

*The blind seer sees the truth, but tries to protect Oedipus by remaining silent. This puts him into conflict with Oedipus, who is merely trying to be a good leader and save his city.*



Now angry, **Oedipus** accuses **Tiresias** of plotting to kill Laius. This upsets Tiresias, who tells Oedipus that Oedipus himself is the cause of the plague—Oedipus is the murderer of Laius. As the insults fly back and forth, Tiresias hints that Oedipus is guilty of further outrages.

*Oedipus, thinking he understands more than he does, is too quick to judge Tiresias. Though Tiresias is a noted seer, Oedipus is too angry to listen to him.*



**Oedipus** convinces himself that **Creon** has put **Tiresias** up to making these accusations in attempt to overthrow him. He mocks Tiresias's blindness and calls the man a false prophet. The leader of the **chorus** tries to calm the two men down. Tiresias warns Oedipus that Oedipus is the blind one—blind to the corrupt details of his own life.

*Oedipus, a man of action, describes blindness as an inability to see. Tiresias, the seer, describes it as an inability to see the truth. In calling Tiresias a false prophet, Oedipus shows his willingness to fight against any prophecy he disagrees with.*



As the men continue to argue, **Tiresias** prophesies that **Oedipus** will know who his parents are by the end of the day, and that this knowledge will destroy him. He leaves with a riddle: the killer of Laius is a native Theban whom many think is a foreigner; he will soon be blind; he is both brother and father to his children; he killed his own father. Both men exit.

*The riddle is a reference to the riddle of the Sphinx. Solving that riddle gave Oedipus his fame. Solving this one will destroy him. In other words, Oedipus's own qualities doom him. This riddle is pretty obvious, but Oedipus is not ready or willing to solve it.*



The **chorus** enters, chanting about the murderer of Laius, pursued now by the gods and the words of a prophecy. The chorus concludes that it will not believe the serious charges brought against **Oedipus** without proof.

*The chorus helps the reader and the audience interpret the play. Here, the reader understands that the people of Thebes are still on Oedipus's side. He is still their champion.*



**Creon** enters, upset that he has been accused of treachery. **Oedipus** enters. He launches further accusations at Creon. Creon tries to defend himself against the charges. He claims he has no idea what **Tiresias** was going to say, and has no desire to be king. He suggests that Oedipus is being unreasonable and paranoid. Oedipus refuses to listen, and says he wants Creon dead. **Jocasta**—Oedipus's wife and Creon's sister—approaches.

*Creon perhaps protests too much when he says he has no desire to be king (as his actions at the end of the play and in Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus will show). However, he is right that Oedipus is making strong accusations without evidence. Oedipus appears quite unreasonable, overcome by anger and the desire to take some decisive action.*



## Lines 709 - 997

**Jocasta** tells **Oedipus** and **Creon** that it's shameful to have public arguments when the city is suffering. When she learns that Oedipus wants to have Creon banished or killed, Jocasta begs Oedipus to believe Creon. The **chorus** echoes her plea. Oedipus thinks that this means the Chorus also wants to see him overthrown. The chorus swears they don't.

*Oedipus remains in a high state of agitation. He is defensive and still inclined to see a conspiracy. Some critics have argued that Oedipus is so quick to see conspiracies because he actually senses his own guilt, but is trying to hide from it.*



Moved by the **chorus**'s expression of loyalty, **Oedipus** allows **Creon** to go free, though he says that he still doesn't believe that Creon is innocent. Creon exits, declaring that Oedipus is both wrong and stubborn.

*Oedipus seems willing to listen to his subjects in this scene, though he doesn't take the advice of those who tell him not to pursue the story of his birth.*



**Jocasta** asks how **Oedipus**'s argument with **Creon** started. Oedipus tells her that Creon sent **Tiresias** to accuse Oedipus of Laius's death. Jocasta responds that Oedipus shouldn't worry about the seer's accusation because the revelations of prophets are meaningless.

*Jocasta declares outright that prophecy is a sham. She doesn't believe in the truth of oracles or prophecies, which, by extension, implies that she does not believe in the gods.*





Jocasta tells a story from her past: When Laius and **Jocasta** were still married, an oracle told Laius that he would be killed by his own son. In response, when Jocasta and Laius's son was three-days-old, his **ankles** were pinned together and one of Laius's servants left him to die on a mountain. Laius was not killed by his son, but instead by strangers, at a place where **three roads meet**. So, Jocasta concludes, seers don't know what they're talking about.

**Jocasta's** story troubles **Oedipus**, so he asks **Jocasta** for more details about the murder of Laius. He grows even more concerned when she tells him that the murder took place just before Oedipus arrived in Thebes, and describes what Laius looked like and how many men accompanied him. Now truly worried, Oedipus asks Jocasta to send for the lone survivor of the murder of Laius and his men to come to Thebes and tell them what he saw that day.

**Jocasta** asks to know what's troubling **Oedipus**. Oedipus tells her his life story. His father Polybus and his mother Merope were king and queen of Corinth. One day, at a banquet, he heard gossip that the king and queen were not really his parents. To learn the truth he went to the oracle at Delphi, where he received a prophecy that he would sleep with his mother and kill his father.

Terrified, **Oedipus** never returned to Corinth in order to ensure that the prophecy would not come true. As he wandered, he one day reached the place where **Jocasta** says King Laius was killed. There he had an incident with a group of men who pushed him off the road and tried to kill him. He defended himself, and ended up killing them. Oedipus now fears one of the men he killed was Laius, and the curses that he himself showered upon the old king's murderer will now come down upon his own head.

The **chorus** tells **Oedipus** to remain hopeful until he questions the witness he has sent for. Oedipus takes heart—after all, the witness, a **shepherd**, had said that a group of thieves killed Laius, not just one man. **Jocasta** also tells him not to worry, because the murder of Laius does not fit the prophecy anyway. Apollo said that her son would kill her husband, and her son was left to die in the mountains. They exit.

The **chorus**, alone on stage, chants about the gods who rule the world from Olympus, striking down those who gain power by disregarding the gods' laws and protecting those men who faithfully serve the state. But then the Chorus goes on to say that if a sinner is not punished or if the prophecies and oracles of the gods turn out to be untrue, then there is no reason to worship or have faith in the Gods.

## Lines 998 - 1310

**Jocasta** enters and makes an offering to Apollo to appease **Oedipus's** mind. Just then, a **messenger**—an old man—arrives from Corinth, with news that the people there want to make Oedipus their king. Polybus, king of Corinth—the man Oedipus believes to be his father—has died. Jocasta is overjoyed because she views Polybus's death as further proof that the prophecies are false.

**Oedipus** enters and learns the news. Relieved, he celebrates with Jocasta and agrees with her that the oracles and prophecies are "dead," and that chance alone rules the world.

**Jocasta** urges Oedipus to live without fear. Yet Oedipus admits that because his mother is still alive, part of the prophecy might still come true.

*Jocasta once believed in oracles enough to sacrifice her infant son. But now that she's sure the prophecy didn't come true, she no longer believes in prophecies. But in explaining why she doesn't believe in prophecies, she provides the details that make Oedipus suspect the prophecy might be true. Like Oedipus, she dooms herself.*

*While Oedipus was quick to accuse Creon, he is just as quick to abandon his conspiracy theory once new evidence arises. Now he's back in detective mode.*

*Oedipus reveals the second major prophecy of the Oedipus story. The first prophecy, given to Laius and Jocasta, mentions only that the son would kill the father. The prophecy given to Oedipus brings up the other shameful atrocity: incest.*

*When he realizes that he may have killed Laius, Oedipus worries that the punishment of exile that he promised for Laius's killer will fall on his own head. That would be bad enough—by his own decree, he would be banished. But because he still thinks he thwarted the prophecy by leaving Corinth, however, he doesn't realize that the gods will punish him as well.*

*Oedipus gets some reprieve from his fears and doubts. If he investigates no further, he can walk away believing that he isn't the murderer of Laius. Yet in believing that the prophecies have not come to pass he too is now dangerously close to denying the power of the gods.*

*The chorus suggests that the stakes are very high. At this moment the prophecies look unlikely, and if these prophecies don't come true, why should people believe any prophecies? If the words of the gods aren't true, doesn't that call into question the existence of the gods?*

*The news from Corinth seems like further evidence to support Jocasta's claim that prophecies are meaningless. If King Polybus has died of natural causes, then Oedipus can't fulfill the prophecy and kill his own father.*

*The idea that chance, rather than the gods, rules the world is deeply blasphemous. It is significant that from this moment on, things come crashing down.*

*Even so, Oedipus is not completely able to deny either his guilt or his belief in fate.*

The **messenger** asks what **Oedipus** is afraid of. Oedipus tells him the prophecy—that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother—and says that this is why he has never returned to Corinth. The messenger tells Oedipus he never had anything to fear. Polybus and Merope weren't his real father and mother.

The **messenger** tells **Oedipus** that he (the messenger) came upon a baby on the side of Mount Cithaeron, near Thebes. He freed the baby's **ankles**, which were pinned together, and gave the baby to Polybus to raise as a gift. That baby grew up to be Oedipus, who still walks with a limp because of the injury to his ankles. When Oedipus asks for more details about who his parents were, the messenger says he doesn't know, but was given the baby by another **shepherd** who was a servant of Laius.

**Jocasta** reacts sharply to this last piece of news. Meanwhile, the **chorus** tells **Oedipus** that this other **shepherd**, Laius's old servant, is the same man as the eyewitness to the murder of Laius.

**Jocasta** now begs **Oedipus** to abandon his search for his origins. Oedipus thinks she's worried that he will discover he's the son of some slave or commoner, a fact that might shame her. She insists that isn't it, and continues to beg him not to question the **shepherd**. He won't listen to her. At last, she lets out a wrenching scream, calls Oedipus a "man of agony," and flees through the palace.

**Oedipus** declares that he must know the secret of his birth, no matter how common his origins. A **shepherd** approaches. The **messenger** confirms that it's the same man who gave him the baby. Oedipus and the messenger question the old shepherd. When they bring up the subject of the baby, the **shepherd** refuses to speak.

Only after Oedipus threatens to torture the **shepherd** does the shepherd admit that he gave the baby to the **messenger**. The shepherd then refuses to name the father and mother of the baby. Oedipus threatens to kill the shepherd if he does not speak. Finally, the shepherd gives in: the parents of the baby were Laius and **Jocasta**. The shepherd says he was told to kill the baby boy because of a prophecy that he would grow up to kill his father. But the shepherd took pity on the baby and gave it to the messenger.

Realizing who he is, and that the prophecies have come to pass, Oedipus lets out a terrible cry and rushes into the palace. The **messenger** and **shepherd** exit.

*By leaving Corinth, Oedipus thought he was thwarting the prophecy, but instead he was carrying it out. Here the messenger thinks he is helping Oedipus, but is in fact dooming him. Fate is unavoidable.*

*The detail about the pinned ankles links Oedipus to the baby who Jocasta and Laius tried to kill. Oedipus's swollen ankles are marks of his fate. Yet Oedipus, who solved the riddle of the Sphinx, still can't see it. His search for the truth has actually blinded him to the truth.*

*Jocasta has realized the awful truth: her current husband is in fact her son.*

*Though she knows the truth, Jocasta desperately wants to hide from it, hoping that by maintaining some bit of doubt they might escape their guilt and fate. But Oedipus is still blind, and refuses to stop. He relentlessly pursues the very truth that will destroy him.*

*This is a moment of great dramatic irony, when the audience knows the truth, and other characters know the truth, but the main character still does not. As many characters have before, the shepherd tries to stop the discovery of the truth.*

*The shepherd is the last roadblock between Oedipus and disaster, and fittingly, he is the most reluctant to speak. In his blind need to know the truth, Oedipus forces his way past every obstacle. He truly dooms himself, even going so far as to threaten to kill the shepherd, to make him speak the very words which seal Oedipus's fate.*

*Now Oedipus knows everything. His fate is revealed, his blindness lifted, and his guilt and shame descend upon him.*

## Lines 1311 - 1680

The **chorus**, left alone on stage, chants first of **Oedipus's** greatness among men, and then about how fate brought about his horrifying destruction. The chorus adds that though Oedipus saved Thebes (from the Sphinx), the city would have been better off had it never seen Oedipus.

A second messenger enters with news of events in the palace. **Jocasta** locked herself in her room to mourn Laius and her own fate. In hysterical grief, **Oedipus** ran through the palace searching for Jocasta with sword drawn, cursing her. He knocked down her door to find hat she had hanged herself. Now weeping, Oedipus embraced Jocasta and lowered her to the floor. He took two golden brooches (pins) from her robes, and plunged them into his eyes until he was blind, screaming that he no longer wanted to see the world now that he knew the truth.

*Though he committed them unwittingly, Oedipus's deeds are so shameful that even the Thebans whom he saved from the Sphinx find him repulsive and wish they were blind to him.*

*Oedipus's deliberate self-mutilation remains one of the most shocking acts in theater. But, as typically happens in Greek drama, the violence takes place off stage and then is described on stage by someone who witnessed it. The truth, and the shame and guilt its discovery released, have killed Jocasta and blinded Oedipus.*

The **chorus** and the **messenger** are struck with grief and pity. **Oedipus** enters, but they can't bear to look at him. Blood pouring from his eyes, Oedipus speaks of his agony, of darkness, of insanity. He begs to be cast out of Thebes as a cursed man. He wishes he'd never been saved as a baby.

**Oedipus** gives a long and heart-rending speech about the terrible things he has done and that have happened to him, as ordained by Apollo. Yet he insists that it was his own hand that blinded himself, he claims, not the hand of fate. The **chorus** asks why he blinded himself instead of killing himself. Oedipus says he could not bear to look his father and mother in the eyes in Hades (hell), and, alive, he cannot look bear to look at the faces of his children or his countrymen. He asks the chorus to hide him, kill him, or hurl him into the sea.

**Creon** enters. The Chorus expresses hope that he will restore order to Thebes. Creon forgives Oedipus for his past actions, and orders that Oedipus be brought inside so that his shame may be dealt with privately. **Oedipus** begs Creon to banish him in order to save Thebes. Creon agrees to do it, but only after consulting an oracle to make sure that the gods support such an action. Oedipus notes that his sons are old enough to take care of themselves, but begs Creon to look after his daughters, **Antigone** and **Ismene**.

*Oedipus is still revolting because of his past deeds, but his act of blinding himself has immediately made him worthy of pity too. He's now a victim more than a villain.*



*Although Tiresias predicted that Oedipus would end up blind, Oedipus emphasizes that it was his own choice to blind himself. He did not choose to kill his father or marry his mother. That, he says, was the will of the gods. But blinding himself was an act of his own free will, a response to the fate and shame that the gods have forced on him.*



*Just as Oedipus restored order by defeating the Sphinx, Creon restores order now. Creon has assumed the role of leader without missing a beat. Notice his different leadership style, though. Where Oedipus was a man of action and was willing to try to defy fate, Creon is much more cautious and makes sure he is doing the will of the gods before acting.*



At **Oedipus's** request, Creon sends for **Antigone** and **Ismene**, who enter, crying. Oedipus hugs them. Weeping, he tells them that they will be shunned because of his terrible acts, and that as the products of an incestuous marriage they will be unable to find husbands. He tells them to pray for a life better than their father's.

**Creon** then puts an end to **Oedipus's** time with his daughters, and again refuses to grant Oedipus's wish for immediate banishment until the gods explicitly grant it. Oedipus then asks Creon to give him more time with his daughters, but Creon responds only by reminding Oedipus that he will no longer have any power for the rest of his life.

All exit except the **Chorus**, which laments that even the most powerful and skillful of men can be ruined by fate. The Chorus ends with these tragic words: "Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last."

*Oedipus is correct that his misfortune will continue into the next generation, as shown in Sophocles's play Antigone. Throughout Greek literature, shame and guilt are often passed down through families.*



*Creon's treatment of Oedipus at first seemed gracious. Now he begins to flex his political power, but Creon ends up wrong. In Oedipus at Colonus, the dying Oedipus has gained a new kind of power that Creon will try to take and control.*



*The chorus suggests that, just as Oedipus was unable to escape his destiny, all people, however great, are always subject to the whims of fate and the gods. Trying to escape fate brings more pain, which can only be stopped by death.*



## Important Quotes

### Lines 1-340 Quotes

Here I am myself—  
you all know me, the world knows my fame:  
I am Oedipus.  
— *Oedipus*, 7-9 (*Fagles*)

If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin  
launched against our walls  
you hurled the flame of pain  
far, far from Thebes—you gods,  
come now, come down once more!  
— *Chorus*, 186-189 (*Fagles*)

Thebes, city of death, one long cortege  
and the suffering rises  
walls for mercy rise  
and the wild hymn for the Healer blazes out  
clashing with our sobs our cries of mourning—  
O golden daughter of god, send rescue  
radiant as the kindness in your eyes!  
— *Chorus*, 211-217 (*Fagles*)

Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,  
a lone man unknown in his crime  
or one among many, let that man drag out  
his life in agony, step by painful step—  
— *Oedipus*, 280-283 (*Fagles*)

### Lines 340-708 Quotes

Just send me home. You bear your burdens,  
I'll bear mine. It's better that way,  
please believe me.  
— *Tiresias*, 364-366 (*Fagles*)

Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,  
you and your birds, your gods—nothing.  
No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,  
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,  
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.  
— *Oedipus*, 449-453 (*Fagles*)

No man will ever  
be rooted from the earth as brutally as you.  
— *Tiresias*, 488-489 (*Fagles*)

Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich,  
he will grope his way toward a foreign soil,  
a stick tapping before him step by step.  
— *Tiresias*, 517-519 (*Fagles*)

But whether a mere man can know the truth,  
whether a seer can fathom more than I—  
there is no test, no certain proof  
though matching skill for skill  
a man can outstrip a rival. No, not till I see  
these charges proved will I side with his accusers....  
Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.  
— *Chorus*, 563-568, 572 (*Fagles*)

### Lines 709-997 Quotes

Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—  
you will go too far. It's perfect justice:  
natures like yours are hardest on themselves.  
— *Creon*, 746-748 (*Fagles*)

You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed, shattered—  
straight on course. Now again, good helmsman,  
steer us through the storm!  
— *Chorus*, 765-767 (*Fagles*)

Listen to me and learn some peace of mind:  
no skill in the world,  
nothing human can penetrate the future.  
— *Jocasta*, 780-782 (*Fagles*)

Great laws tower above us, reared on high  
born for the brilliant vault of heaven—  
Olympian Sky their only father,  
nothing mortal, no man gave them birth,  
their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:

within them lives a mighty god, the god does not  
grow old.  
— *Chorus*, 957-962 (*Fagles*)

### Lines 998-1310 Quotes

They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,  
now our masters strike them off the rolls.  
Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—  
the gods, the gods go down.  
— *Chorus*, 994-997 (*Fagles*)

Man of agony—  
that is the only name I have for you,  
that, no other—ever, ever, ever!  
— *Jocasta*, 1176-1179 (*Fagles*)

If you are the man he says you are, believe me  
you were born for pain.  
— *Shepherd*, 1304-1305 (*Fagles*)

### Lines 1311-1680 Quotes

"...is there a man more agonized?  
More wed to pain and frenzy? Not a man on earth,  
the joy of your life ground down to nothing  
O Oedipus, name for the ages—"  
— *Chorus*, 1331-1334 (*Fagles*)

My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!  
— *Oedipus*, 1448 (*Fagles*)

Take me away, far, far from Thebes,  
quickly, cast me away, my friends—  
this great murderous ruin, this man cursed to heaven,  
the man the deathless gods hate most of all!  
— *Oedipus*, 1477-1480 (*Fagles*)

Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,  
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.  
— *Chorus*, 1683-84 (*Fagles*)

# ThemeTracker™

The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

Themes	Lines
	<p><b>Back-story</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>King Laius and <b>Queen Jocasta</b> of Thebes receive a prophecy that their son will grow up to kill his father. When their son is born, they fix his ankles together and give him to a servant, a <b>shepherd</b>, with orders to leave him to die in the wilderness of Mt. Cithaeron.</li> <li>Instead, the <b>shepherd</b> gives the baby to a <b>messenger</b> who brings him to Corinth and gives him to the king and queen. They raise him as their child and call him <b>Oedipus</b>.</li> <li>As a young man, <b>Oedipus</b> travels to the oracle of Apollo to learn about his past. He is told that he is destined to kill his father and sleep with his mother. To prevent this from happening, he never returns to Corinth.</li> <li>In self-imposed exile, traveling along the road, <b>Oedipus</b> gets in a fight with several men and kills them.</li> <li><b>Oedipus</b> arrives at Thebes, solves the riddle of the Sphinx, frees the city, and is made king. He marries <b>Jocasta</b>, the widow of the previous king, Laius, who was killed while on a journey, under circumstances that aren't entirely clear.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>1 – 340</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The priests of Thebes tell <b>Oedipus</b> about the plague and other miseries suffered by the people of Thebes. They ask Oedipus to help them lift the curse that seems to have fallen on the city.</li> <li><b>Creon</b>, <b>Oedipus's</b> brother-in-law, brings news from the oracle at Delphi. The oracle says that murderer of King Laius lives in Thebes and must be punished before the plague will lift.</li> <li><b>Oedipus</b> curses the murderer and says he will find the killer.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>341 – 708</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Tiresias</b>, the blind seer, comes to the palace at <b>Oedipus's</b> request.</li> <li><b>Tiresias</b> refuses to tell <b>Oedipus</b> what he knows about the murder. Oedipus insults Tiresias and Tiresias tells him that he—Oedipus—is the murderer of Laius.</li> <li><b>Oedipus</b> accuses <b>Tiresias</b> of inventing this false accusation and of plotting with <b>Creon</b> to overthrow him.</li> <li>Convinced that <b>Creon</b> is plotting against him, <b>Oedipus</b> threatens to kill or banish his brother-in-law. Creon protests his innocence.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>709 – 997</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Jocasta</b> and the <b>chorus</b> (representing the citizens of Thebes) support <b>Creon's</b> claims of innocence. <b>Oedipus</b> reluctantly backs off from his threat to execute Creon.</li> <li><b>Jocasta</b> says seers and prophets aren't trustworthy. She tells the story of the prophecy about her son killing Laius, which she says didn't come to pass. Laius was killed by an unknown stranger.</li> <li><b>Oedipus</b> grows nervous when he hears where Laius was killed—it's the same place where he killed several men before he came to Thebes. He sends for the one surviving eyewitness to the old king's death—an old <b>shepherd</b>.</li> <li><b>Oedipus</b> tells <b>Jocasta</b> about the prophecy he received as a young man—about killing his father and sleeping with his mother.</li> <li><b>Jocasta</b> tries to calm <b>Oedipus</b> and again tells him not to put any stock in prophecies.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>998 – 1310</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <b>messenger</b> arrives from Corinth with the news that the king—whom <b>Oedipus</b> thinks is his father—has died of natural causes. This news relieves <b>Oedipus</b> because it seems to contradict the prophecy. But he's still concerned because his mother is alive in Corinth.</li> <li>The <b>messenger</b> assures Oedipus not to worry: the queen of Corinth is not really his mother. The <b>messenger</b> says he brought <b>Oedipus</b> as a baby to the king and queen of Corinth after receiving the infant from a Theban <b>shepherd</b>.</li> <li><b>Jocasta</b> begs <b>Oedipus</b> not to search further into his origins. <b>Oedipus</b> insists on knowing the truth. <b>Jocasta</b> flees into the palace, mad with grief, which Oedipus mistakes as shame at the possibility that he is the son of a <b>shepherd</b>.</li> <li>The <b>shepherd</b> arrives. The <b>messenger</b> confirms that this is the man who gave him the baby. The <b>shepherd</b> doesn't want to say anything. Only under threat of death does he admit that <b>Oedipus</b> is the child of Laius and <b>Jocasta</b>. <b>Oedipus</b> realizes that the prophecy has come true. He has killed his father and married his mother.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>1311 – 1688</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <b>chorus</b> chants about <b>Oedipus's</b> former greatness and this terrible fall from grace.</li> <li>The <b>messenger</b> announces that the queen has killed herself and <b>Oedipus</b> has gouged out his own eyes.</li> <li><b>Oedipus</b> pleads with <b>Creon</b> to be banished from Thebes. Creon agrees.</li> <li><b>Oedipus</b> says goodbye to his daughters.</li> <li>The <b>chorus</b> chants about the power of fate to destroy even the greatest of men. The chorus says only death can bring an end to suffering.</li> </ul>

## Theme Key

- Fate vs. Free Will
- Guilt and Shame
- Sight vs. Blindness
- Finding Out the Truth
- Action vs. Reflection